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OSSIANIC CONTROVERSY:

A LECTURE

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GREENOCK HIGHLAND SOCIETY

BY THE

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OSSIANIC CONTROVERSY.

BEFORE we approach the merits of this controversy, we must briefly allude to its origin, and the circumstances which at first roused suspicion in the minds of literary men regarding the authenticity and genuineness of the Ossianic poems.

About the middle of the last century John Home, the author of the once-celebrated tragedy of "Douglas," had his attention drawn to the subject of Gaelic poetry, through an article in the *Scots Magazine*, written by a man named Jerome Stone, a native of the parish of Scoonie, Fifeshire, and rector of an academy at Dunkeld. Mr Home conferred with Professor Ferguson, of the Edinburgh University, on the subject of Gaelic poetry, and questioned him as to the truth of Stone's statements regarding its excellence. Professor Ferguson confirmed the opinion of Mr Stone, regarding the merits of those hitherto uncollected stores of intellectual wealth, treasured up in the poetical compositions possessed by the Highlanders of Scotland. James Macpherson, a native of Badenoch, was officiating as tutor to the family of Mr Graham, younger of Balgowan, in the year 1759. In the summer of that year Mr Home happened to be at Moffat, where he met Macpherson. In the course of conversation he discovered that Macpherson was in possession of some pieces of original Gaelic poetry, one of which he desired to be translated. Macpherson furnished him with a translation of two fragments which he very much admired. On his return to Edinburgh, Home communicated to the circle of his literary friends his discoveries of valuable curiosities in literature. The literary circle at the time consisted of David Hume, the historian; Dr Robertson, Dr Blair, Dr Carlyle, Mr Home, and others. Of these Dr Blair specially interested himself in the collecting and publishing of these Ossianic poems. So much did he admire the specimens shown him by Mr Home, that he desired an immediate interview with Mr Macpherson. The latter informed him that these were but specimens of greater and more considerable poems, well known to the natives of the Highlands, and frequently rehearsed at their firesides. Dr Blair urged him to translate into English all the fragments at his command, at the same time promising that he would secure their circulation. Macpherson was most reluctant to undertake this task, declaring, what every Highlander knows to be true, that "no translation of his could do justice to the spirit and force of the original; and that, besides injuring them by translation, he apprehended that they would be very ill relished by the public, as being so very different from the strain of modern ideas, and of modern and correct poetry." By appealing, however, to his patriotism as a Highlander, Macpherson was prevailed upon to undertake the duty of translation, and several pieces were published in the year 1760, under the title "Fragments of Ancient Poetry, collected in the Highlands of Scotland."

These "Fragments" having obtained much public favour, Macpherson was prevailed upon, by Dr Blair and a circle of friends, to disengage himself from all other employments and to set out on a tour to the Highlands. Consequently, in the year

1760, he travelled through the north-western parts of Inverness-shire, the Isle of Skye, and some of the adjacent islands. In the course of his tour he corresponded with Dr Blair and others as to his success in discovering the remains of ancient poetry. On his return to Edinburgh, in the year 1761, he published "Fingal," an epic poem; and in the following year, 1762, another epic poem called "Temora," affixing to one of the books of the latter the original Gaelic.

The success of these poems was truly marvellous. The literary world stood aghast and gazed upon them with admiration. They were translated into French, German and Italian. They obtained a place in the library of Napoleon, and received the commendation of Goëthe, of Schiller, and of the great historian David Hume. But the tide was soon to turn. The old prejudice—"Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?"—stirred up many opponents. Was it possible that such gems should be found among such barbarous hordes as the Highlanders of Scotland? Had they been discovered in the plains of sunny England, these poems would have been perfectly genuine; but who would believe that such gems could be found among the savages of the North? Macpherson was denounced as an impudent forger. The great moralist Dr Johnson, Mr Pinkerton, and Mr Laing, author of a History of Scotland, took up the cudgel against him. The prejudices against Highlanders which still exist, even in the Nineteenth Century, in the minds of Lowlanders and Englishmen, I believe were the origin of such violent assaults; but we cannot say that Macpherson himself was free of blame. Instead of boldly coming forward to defend his position he became sulky. When called upon to publish the originals he declared he had no money. When the money was offered to him he had no time. Indeed, it appears to me that to Macpherson's proud and sullen temper, combined with his ambiguous manner of expression—at one time calling himself author, at another translator—we are indebted for all the reasonable suspicions attached to the authenticity of these Ossianic poems. In a letter to Dr Blair, dated 6th October, 1763, David Hume depicts the feelings with which Macpherson regarded the attacks made upon his veracity.

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"You must expect," he says, "no assistance from Macpherson, who flew into a passion when I told him of the letter I had wrote to you. But you must not mind so strange and heteroclite a mortal, than whom I have scarce ever known a man more perverse and unamiable. He will probably depart for Florida with Governor Johnstone, and I would advise him to travel among the Chickisaws or Cherokees in order to tame and civilize him." But this must be said in his behalf that he deposited his MSS. with his publishers Beckett and De Hondt, Strand, London, and published the fact in the newspapers. But no one took the trouble of examining them. His friends did not think it necessary, and his foes were not equal to the task. Had he, however, preserved the original MSS. collected from his friends in the Highlands, the controversy would have been settled at his death; but the originals were either lost or destroyed, and the poems left behind him and published by the Highland Society of London in 1807, were found to be either in the handwriting of Macpherson or his amanuensis. Such is the origin of this controversy.

I now turn your attention to its merits, and shall endeavour to classify and set before you, in an intelligible and concise manner, the arguments for and against the authenticity of the Ossianic poems.

I. It is objected that poems breathing a spirit of such tenderness and refinement could not possibly have been the production of such a barbarous people as the Caledonians. Ossian is supposed to have lived about the close of the second or the beginning of the third century, and it is argued from the state of civilisation among the Celtic nations of that period that such a work as that of Ossian must be an impossibility. "The production of the Celtic muse," says Mr Laing, "would persuade us to believe that the early manners of the Highlanders displayed a civilisation inconsistent with an utter ignorance of the arts of life; an uniform heroism unknown to barbarians; a gallantry which chivalry never inspired; a humanity which refinement has never equalled, and that before their advance to the shepherd state they possessed a correct taste, a polished diction, a cultivated and sublime poetry enriched with the choicest images of classical antiquity and intermixed with all the sentimental affectation of the present times." (History of Scotland, Vol. III.) As this is one of the gravest objections offered against the authenticity of the poems, it deserves our gravest consideration. Many are but too glad to believe in the barbarity of our Highlanders even as they exist in the Nineteenth Century; and when they think of the period of fourteen or fifteen centuries elapsing between the composition and publication of these poems, they are too ready to acquiesce without much further inquiry in the opinion expressed by Mr Laing. Mr Laing pays a high compliment to the poetry ascribed to Ossian, and if these poems be his genuine productions he indirectly pays a similar compliment to the author and to the race to which he belonged. The sculptured stones of Scotland, the vitrified forts, the brave resistance offered by the Caledonians to the Romans, the speech of Galgacus at the battle of the Grampians, all show that the Caledonians of the second and third centuries were not altogether so barbarous as Mr

Laing would have them. He speaks of the Celts as not having advanced even to the shepherd state, and is consequently staggered at the refinement of their poetry and the spirit of generosity and affection which it breathes. He seems, however, to forget the fact that poetry is earlier than prose, and comes earlier into perfection. Poetry may well be defined the language of impassioned feeling, and does not require cultivated reason. The earliest records of all nations are preserved not in prose but in poetry, and in as much as it is earlier cultivated than the other arts it comes sooner into perfection. The human race advances towards civilisation according to well-defined stages. We find man first as a hunter, then as a shepherd, then as farmer or agriculturist, and, last of all, in the commercial state. The poetry of any era embodies the prevailing sentiment of that era, and, if abundantly collected, forms a very fair index of the mental culture of that age. In the days of Ossian the Caledonians were hunters; hence Mr Laing assumes that their breasts could not have been filled with any noble and generous feelings, such as are embodied in the character of Ossianic heroes. Is he warranted to make this assumption? If so, can he not make some allowance for the tenderness and generosity of the Bard's own nature and the colouring of his fancy? Do we not know that, as waters receive their taste from the sands through which they pass, a man's writings take the colour of his own mind? Do we not know that a rude age is the age for poetry, and that, in as much as the reason is cultivated, the imagination is curbed? Besides, Julius Cæsar makes mention of the Druids, and from the description given of them he no doubt includes in that order the Bards. They, the Bards, had their Colleges, and some of their pupils were twenty years under training. Rude then as the Celts might have been as to the knowledge of the useful arts, we could not expect them to be rude in regard to the art of poetry. Ossian's poems are just what we would expect as the effusions of the hunters' age, artless, simple, bold, sublime.

II. But it has been said that, supposing these poems had been composed by Ossian, to preserve them for fourteen or fifteen centuries would have been impossible. In a letter upon this subject to Dr Blair, David Hume says, "The preservation of such long and such connected poems by oral tradition alone, during a course of fourteen centuries, is so much out of the ordinary course of human affairs, that it requires the strongest reasons to make us believe it." In a letter to Gibbon he states the same objection in different words, taking good care to point out to him the rude and uncivilised character of the Highlanders. That "the preservation of such long and connected poems by oral tradition," throughout a lengthened period of fourteen centuries, seems at first sight strange, cannot be denied. But we must remember that we are not to judge bygone ages entirely by the present; and I cannot help thinking that had the historian taken a little more trouble to investigate the manners, and customs, and institutions of the Highlanders, during the fourteen or fifteen centuries referred to, he would have discovered that the preservation of these poems was not so wonderful as at first he imagined. Men in those days possessed more retentive memories than in the days of Hume. The art of printing has increased knowledge, but it has not improved the memory. When men have their libraries stored with books they have no occasion to tax their memories, they have only to refer to their authorities. But in an age when knowledge is not so stereotyped, men have to trust to their own mental repositories. In those days literature was scarce, and consequently precious, and, as an heirloom, handed down from father to son. The Highlanders occupied an isolated position, and during the winter evenings, and at their feasts and entertainments, their chief pastime consisted in reciting the poetry of their country's bards. Besides, the bardic was one of their most ancient, and, at the same time, one of their most honoured institutions. The Druids were their priests and philosophers, and the Bards their poets and historians. One of the laws of the Druids provided that none of their mysteries should be committed to writing; and a Bard, in order to obtain his honorary degree, required to commit to memory so many thousand pieces of the poetical compositions of his native country. Thus we see that by the institution of the Bards, and the constant rehearsal of the people, these poems could have been handed down from one generation to another.

III. Further, it has been said that the Highlands of Scotland cannot produce a single poem of older date than the eighteenth century. "If a single poem of Ossian," says Mr Laing, "in manuscript, of an older date than the present century (1700), be procured and lodged in a public library, I shall return among the first to our national creed." Whether Mr Laing did or did not return to his national creed, I am not in a position to say; but this we know, that the manuscripts of the Dean of Lismore, lately published by the Rev. Dr M'Lachlan, of Edinburgh, were written between the years 1512 and 1526.

IV. But Mr Laing is not contented with making this bold but unfounded assertion, he charges Macpherson with plagiarism. He tells us that he had stolen these compositions from Holy Writ, and the classical poets of ancient and modern times. This charge is ably met by Dr Clark, of Kilmallie, in his "Dissertation on the Authenticity of the Poems of Ossian," to which I would refer any one who is desirous of seeing the whole subject clearly and concisely discussed. Strange, indeed, that Mr Laing had not said that Ossian stole his glowing pictures from the ancient classics! He was, no doubt, far too barbarous to drink from such refined fountains! It is easy to charge an author with plagiarism, but not so easy to substantiate such a charge. If two authors, in describing the same scene, employ the same images, does that prove that either is a plagiarist? On the contrary, we would say that, more especially in describing natural objects, the nearer they approach each other in their descriptions the rarer their genius. For, in what does true poetical genius consist but in "holding up the mirror to nature?"

V. It has been further alleged that the want of any allusion to religion proves the work to be a forgery. Mr Laing affirms, "that from the difficulty of inventing a religious mythology, Macpherson has created a savage society of refined Atheists, who believe in ghosts, but not in deities; and that, solicitous only for proper machinery, he has rendered the Highlanders a race of unparalleled infidels, who believed in no God but the ghosts of their fathers" It is certainly not easy to account for the absence of any allusion to religion in the poems. Man in all ages, and under all circumstances, is a religious being, and we cannot believe that the Highlanders were a race of refined Atheists in the time of Ossian. The best solution of the difficulty is that given by Dr Graham of Aberfoyle. He shows that, by the testimony of antiquity, the Celtic hierarchy was divided into several classes, to each of which was assigned its own particular department. The Druids were first in rank, the Bards next, and the Enbages lowest. To the Druids were committed the mysteries of religion—to the Bards the celebration of the warrior's achievements, and the recording of the nation's history. Each order had its province assigned to it, and the one was not to encroach upon the prerogatives of the others. It is not improbable that the Bards were prohibited by law from mixing up the mysteries of religion with the secular themes of their songs; and even granting, as is by most writers supposed, that before Ossian's time the Druidical hierarchy had been abolished, may we not suppose that by the force of custom the Bard would have been restrained from making any allusion to religion?

VI. It has been said, if the poems, of which Macpherson pretended to have given a translation, did really exist, how does it happen that they could not afterwards be found among the Highlanders? Surely Macpherson did not gather up all the manuscripts available at the time; and even, supposing he did, poems that for ages had been preserved by oral tradition would still survive in the memories of those who were in the habit of reciting them. That such poems did exist in Macpherson's day is proved by his own confession, the testimony of some of those from whom pieces were received, and the evidence of the Rev. Andrew Gallie, Badenoch, and Mr Macpherson, Strathmashie, who had seen them in his possession, and assisted him in collating the various editions, and in translating the most difficult passages. But it is rather unfortunate that the Highland Society Committee, after the strictest inquiry, were obliged to confess that though they had discovered pieces in substance and expression the same as those translated by Macpherson, yet they could not say they had found *any one poem* throughout exactly the same in title or tenor. This is perhaps the strongest argument against the authenticity of the Ossianic poetry. It is, however, to be remembered that the Committee had not begun their search till after the lapse of forty years, during which period the condition of the Highlanders had undergone a very considerable change. Indeed the probability is that had the poems not been collected before the end of last century they would have been entirely lost to the literary world. After the Rebellion of 1745 the old system of clanship was broken up—the people oppressed by tyrannical laws, and the growing rapacity of landlords, lost their chivalry and their poetry. It must also be remembered that, through the energy and zeal of Sir John Sinclair, Bart., and the kindness of Doctor Cameron, Catholic Bishop of Edinburgh, we have obtained sufficient evidence to show that a collection of Ossianic poems had been made by the Rev. John Farquharson, a Jesuit, in the year 1745, while residing at Strathglass. In 1766 Mr Farquharson was Prefect of Studies at the Scots College, Douay, when he received a copy of Macpherson's translation. In presence of the Rev. James Macgilvray, and others, Farquharson's manuscripts were compared with the translation, when Mr Farquharson declared that he *had all these poems in his collection.* Unhappily his collection was lost—the leaves being torn and used by the students to kindle their fires.

Who, then, composed these poems? By some it has been said that they are of Irish origin. When the works of Ossian were given out to the world, some of the Irish Celts cried out, these are the poems of our country. If so, where did Macpherson find them? We have sufficient evidence that he travelled through the Highlands in search of poetry, but we have no evidence to show that he ever put a foot upon the Emerald Isle. We have the positive testimony of several credible and respectable witnesses, that he had received from them and their friends some Gaelic MSS., and poetical pieces handed down orally; but we have no reason to suppose that he ever received MSS. from Ireland. From Ireland's proximity to the Western Highlands—from the friendly intercourse existing between the Irish and Scotch Celts, as well as from their similarity in language, race, genius and manners, we can easily suppose that possibly the works of the Caledonian Bard might have made their way to Ireland. I have not had an opportunity of examining the Irish poems concerning the "Fiona," or heroes of Fion MacComnal; but learned men who have examined them assure us that their composition is of modern date, and in no way to be compared to the poetry of the Scottish Bard, at least as far as antiquity is concerned. They ascribe their origin to the Fifteenth Century.

Mr Skene, in his Introduction and Notes to the *uirsgeuls* of Ossian collected by the Dean of Lismore, ascribes their authorship to Mr Lachlan Macpherson of Strathmashie. He founds his argument upon some vague rumour he had heard while residing in the neighbourhood of Strathmashie, concerning MSS. found among Mr Macpherson's papers at his death. But are we to believe such vague reports? There is no doubt that Strathmashie did much in aiding his clansman in collecting Gaelic MSS., in transcribing and revising them; but we cannot believe that he was the author of any of them. He was indeed a poet, and a poet of no mean order, but quite incapable of singing in the sublime and heroic strains of the "aged Bard." The pieces he has left us are the best proof of this. The most common opinion among those who reject the authenticity of the Ossianic poetry, is that James Macpherson himself is the author; that he composed the various pieces in English, and afterwards translated them into Gaelic. The Highland Society Committee, in their excellent report, candidly acknowledge that they were unable to find among the natives of the Highlands poems exactly the same as those given to the world by Macpherson; they also acknowledged that Macpherson may have supplied chasms, and softened incidents, and improved the text; but I do not think that any Celtic scholar capable of appreciating Gaelic poetry can believe that Macpherson wrote those ascribed to Ossian. On all hands it is acknowledged that he was no Gaelic scholar, and his "Translation of Homer," and "The Highlander," prove him to be no poet. I would ask any Gaelic scholar if his Ossian reads like a translation—which is always tame and insipid? Do you believe that Homer could have been constructed out of Pope's version, or Virgil out of Dryden's? Why then Ossian out of Macpherson's translation? The strongest proofs of authenticity are those only known to the Celtic scholar—the internal evidence. If Macpherson was the author his was the greatest poetical genius that was ever known—greater than Ossian or Homer. Ossian could have easily described what he had seen and heard; but Macpherson, if the author, had to throw himself back many centuries and create all for himself. The conclusion, therefore, to which I am inevitably driven is that, —"Fingal lived and Ossian sang,"